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The Women of Japan of Old

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"Women of Japan of Old"

By M. Hanihara

Madame and Ladies:

I am not accustomed to speech-making or lecturing, or, to be more exact, I lack that happy training and equipment. It is true that I am sometimes booked to make an address, but only when I see no way out of it and then usually on subjects more or less directly connected with my own trade, which is difficult enough for me.

But today I am to talk on a subject widely different from the political or commercial relations between countries or the meaning of international rights and obligations. The subject you have chosen for me—"Women of Japan of Old"—is certainly a very interesting one, and when you were good enough to ask me to talk on it, I thought, a little too hastily, that I might be able to tell you something about it and said yes, without realizing how difficult it would be to treat such a subject in an informing way.

I now find that all I thought I knew of the subject proved —on examination—to be nothing but "bunk"—if you will pardon my using slang. Every bit of it needed a good deal of study, research and corroboration. And in spite of the fact that you gave me long notice, I have not been able to find sufficient time for the needed study. This I frankly confess in the beginning, lest you be disappointed too greatly. Further I want you to understand that in trying to tell you something on the subject as best I can at present, I do so with perfect consciousness of my liability to errors and incorrectness, which I hope I may be able to rectify some day.

Let me begin with a statement that may surprise you. The position of woman in Japan was for many centuries more prominent, in comparison with that of man, perhaps than in any other nation of the world. It is only within relatively recent times in our history, that is to say, within perhaps three to four hundred years before the restoration of 1867, more especially during the last two hundred years of that period, when the feudal regime was absolute all over the Empire, that the

position of women took its more modest and less prominent appearance in Japan's national life. I say advisedly "appearance," because in reality it was the women who kept homes—the headquarters of families—sacred during those feudal ages. And in my country the family, and not the individual, has from time immemorial been the unit of national and social organization.

In the first place, let me remind you that the original progenitress of the Imperial House was—according to our legend—the Sun-goddess, Ama-terasu, whose descendant Jimmu-Tenno was the first Emperor of Japan. Mr. Curtis Hidden Page tells us on the authority of a good old Japanese encyclopaedia that it was Ama-terasu's mother the goddess Iza-nami-no-mikoto, who, meeting the god Izanagino mikoto, her later consort, exclaimed at once:

"What joy beyond compare
To see a man so fair!"

The masculine genius was much displeased—because he felt he was outwitted, I suppose—and said: "I am the male! It is but reason that I should speak first. How should a woman speak before the man? 'Tis not to be thought of."

Thereupon they decided to go in opposite directions round the great central column. So they met again, god and goddess.

This time the male genius spoke first:

"What joy beyond compare
To see a maid so fair!"

So these words became the origin of Japanese poetry, we are told. And so this is, we are told also to believe, the origin of the courtship, which has been conventionalized to its present form, where woman is not expected to take initiative.

Then there is another story that Susa-no-wo, brother of the goddess Ama-terasu, who, because of his impetuous and unruly character was banished from heaven to earth, once meeting Princess Kushi-Inada was completely overcome by her charms and winning her by his devotion, composed in her honor a most affectionate poem which is preserved today in its supposed original form. If these legends indicate anything it certainly does not show that in our mythological age women held any lower or less independent position in life than men.

Coming down to the later ages of more authentic history, during the period extending over more than a thousand years since the time of the accession of the first Emperor Jimmu and preceding the golden ages of Nara and Heian, which roughly covers the period of 600 B.C.— 600 A.D. in western history, we see women figuring very prominently in war, politics, religion, art and poetry. Names such as Jingu-kogo, who supposedly about the time of Claudius II marshalled a fleet and, with miraculous assistance of waves and fishes, crossed to Korea, which she subdued, and the famous Empresses Suiko and Jito and beautiful Princess Sotohori, suggest only a few of them. History also tells us that in those days there were many women chiefs of the militant tribes in the Island of Kiushu, one of the principal islands of Japan.

Thus the sex sometimes described as the gentler, does not seem always to have deserved the adjective. At all events, it occupies a preëminent place in the early annals of Japan. And for several centuries following, through the ages of Nara and Heian which are celebrated for the glories of their civilization, and even since the usurping military potentates came into power, women continued to stand high in Japanese history not only as acknowledged leaders in learning and literature, but even as factors in politics and in combat of arms. As lately as the end of the 10th Century the novel form appeared in Japanese literature, from a renowned authoress known as Murasaki Shikibu, who was of the famous Fujiwara family.

Aston, in his excellent work on Japanese Literature, describes this 'prose epic of real life' as the first appearance of this literary form. Before that time there had been only stories of no great length, and usually of a highly romantic character, but this woman produced a straightforward record of finely realistic character. Men and women are depicted faithfully, and in a charmingly simple style, as they really exist, in their normal surroundings, and with all their faults and virtues, their passions and their individual weaknesses. There is nothing sensational, nothing horrifying or unnatural, and the whole tale is spun smoothly, giving us a varied and detailed picture of the life and society in the ancient capital of Kyoto, such as we possess for no other country at the same period. The work is called the Genji Monogatari, and has fifty-four admirable chapters.

It was followed by the Makura no soshi by another woman, Sei Shonagon, which is a collection in 12 volumes, of essays and aphorisms, an entertaining and informing miscellany. These are acknowledged today as the best classics in Japanese litera-

ture, and when we consider that they were written at or about the time when King Alfred ruled in England, it becomes a most remarkable fact.

These two works, the greatest of a golden period, are undoubted masterpieces, and bear unmistakable testimony to the independence and intellectual strength of the woman of Japan a thousand years ago.

At an even earlier period, in the 7th and 8th Centuries A.D., the art of poetry was skilfully practised by women. Although poetry at that time was almost exclusively the province of the illustrious classes, those poems have been collected and edited in various forms by successive generations and widely read. Today they constitute an important part of the classic literature of Japan.

Now this brief outline shows us one thing, in connection with other facts that are known to us. In the early times Japan did not share the feeling, common to most Eastern countries and in fact to most Western countries, that women should be kept in subjection. It was not until the later ascendency of Chinese ideas and learning and the rise of military chieftains to power that the apparent position of women was changed. In these early ages Japan was often referred to by the Chinese as the "Queen-Country," and, as Aston says, "many instances might be quoted of Japanese women exercising an influence and maintaining an independence of conduct quite at variance with our preconceived notion of the position of women in the East."

It was only about the end of the 16th Century that there began the period that can be said to connect ancient and modern Japan. It was characterized partly by the end of all intercourse with the outer world, partly by the spread of Chinese scholarship and ideas, mostly those of Confucius, and partly by the strong consolidation of the clan or feudal system, which had been growing for the preceding three centuries.

To whatever of these factors may be attributed the change that took place in the status of woman, it was a fact that there came a change, which seems to me to be more apparent than real. Perhaps it was the development of an ethical system having its origin in China, possibly it was the arising of a necessarily military system of government based on the clan, and—at the foundation itself—on the family, with the consequent emphasis on the duties of loyalty to the head of the house, the man. Perhaps both reasons—they seem to be supplementary—had their influence in causing the change. It was logically reasoned that the obedient child would mature into the

loyal subject, and great insistence in all the Japanese training was made of the paramount importance of the virtues of loyalty and filial piety.

From the beginning of this era women disappear from public life and cease to figure so prominently as their mothers did even in the world of literature. The woman's first duty became that of implicit obedience to her husband and her complete absortion in the service of his family—this characteristic subjection, or more justly I should say, willing self-sacrifice of woman has continued into our own time.

I say willing self-sacrifice, for they, the women, as well as the men, learned by long experience and knew by heart that they were living under feudal rule and that they must bow to it. True enough there were always some few who wanted to defy it, whenever they had chance, but the solid majority of the people loyally supported it, with—to borrow Burke's expression—"that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of heart which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of exalted freedom." In such circumstances it was quite natural and commendable that they came to entertain the view that woman's willing surrender of herself to the good of the home and family, was as honorable and necessary as man's self-surrender to the good of his lord and country.

Under this appearance of submission to men, the women found the satisfaction of being **de facto,** if not **de jure,** masters of their homes and households, and above all supreme guardians of their children. If they were not the real masters, it was nobody's fault but their own.

Naturally their responsibilities were great and they realized it. To meet these responsibilities they had to train themselves not only in the art of household management but in the art of arms to protect themselves and their children and elders, while the men were away on the service of their lords and country. Nor was their education in letters and other arts neglected—for these were required not only for their own refinement, but were necessary equipment for the proper bringing up of their children. And most important of all was their training of moral character. From their girlhood women were trained and disciplined as much as men to repress their feelings, to be always calm and sedate, simple and clean, pure and chaste, graceful but dignified, courteous but firm, obedient but honest and brave but tender. All this training was primarily for themselves and for their homes and children, to which women devoted their lives, and the driving force back of it all was the spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice.

I often hear, from foreigners and sometimes even from my own countrymen, the remarks that the position of women in Japan of old was very low as compared with that of men. But I cannot agree with such hasty assertions. To me they seem not to distinguish between differences and inequalities. In Japan of old it was taken for granted and accepted that there was a difference between men and women, in their temperament and physical constitution, if not in all intellectual and moral faculties. Each accepted their respective spheres of use and activity in this life, and within their own domain women enjoyed just as much power and respect as men.

As a social-political unit of the time woman might have counted as little as on the battlefield, but as wife and mother she was held in the highest respect and received the deepest affection and deference.

If woman's freedom was limited in certain respects, compared with that of man as titular head of the family, she did not feel humiliation or oppression on that account. She had enough to do and enjoy in her own domain.

So far I have been speaking mostly of women of the Samurai class. But what I have said of them is generally true of the women of other classes, such as farmers, artisans and merchants. Perhaps one difference is that women of these more common classes enjoyed a somewhat greater freedom in daily life than did the women of the Samurai class. For the model of womanhood they generally looked to their sisters of the Samurai class. But they were not so much circumscribed as their Samurai sisters were by conventional rules and etiquette, and had freer opportunity for self-expression. Preëminent characteristics of these women of common classes are, besides their inculcated sense of duty as wife and mother, their optimism, love of the beautiful in nature and tenderness for things in general. All these traits contribute to contentment of soul in spite of the seeming hardships of their daily life.

For an illustration, let me tell you a little about Kaga no Chiyo. She lived from 1703 to 1775; was born of a good family of the plebian class and is regarded as one of the most popular exponents in Hokku of the feelings, pathos and thoughts of the people of her class. By the way, Hokku is a new short form of popular poetry, which has been developing since the 15th Century, and is today one of the most popular diversions among men and women of all classes in Japan. Let me borrow from Mr. Page some of his translations and accounts of some of

her Hokku. When she was married, this was Chiyo's wedding-gift to her husband:

The Persimmon, lo!
No one can tell till he tastes it!
Marriage is even so.

Apparently this persimmon was not too puckery; and the marriage was a success, till interrupted by her husband's early death. She lived out the rest of her long life without marrying again, though famous and sought after, and though fallen on days of poverty, and having to make a living by the teaching of her art. She sang her lonely widowhood in the following few lines:

I sleep—I wake—
How wide
The Kaya with none beside.

Kaya means mosquito net. Her little son died too, and her sorrow is feeling expressed in the following lyric:

I wonder in what fields today
He chases dragon-flies in play
My little boy—who ran away.

She had wit, too, and the Japanese cheeriness, to live her life out with, and to meet misfortune, even the misfortune of growing stout. In Japanese poetry, the willow-tree is a symbol of the noble lady, graceful and gracious. Chiyo, going one day to give her lessons at the house, perhaps, of a **nouveau-riche,** heard the maids tittering at the stout lady-poet. Turning quickly, she commanded their respect with this good-natured but witty verse:

The Willow-tree
May an armful be,
But none the less a Willow.

Living simply, perhaps with no servant, Chiyo went one morning to her well to draw water—and found that a morning-glory, quickly growing, had twined around the well-sweep and blossomed. She could not dare disturb it. So she went on to her neighbor's door, asking for water in a six word poem which the neighbor may, just possibly, have appreciated—but which was

in any case destined to become one of the best known of all Hokku:

The Morning-glory
Has stolen my well-sweep today.
Gift-water, pray!

Finally, Chiyo gives, in a poem of seven words, the essence of Oriental philosophy: the conception that all phenomena—the things that seem, including our many individual lives—are but changing and deceptive manifestations of that one central life which is the universe:

All things that seem
are but
One dreamer's dream.

I have taken much time for the story of Kaga no Chiyo, in the hope that it may give you a general idea as to the place in, and views of, life of the fair victims of the subject of my talk.

I said before that such conception of womanhood and its influence has continued into our own time. I did not mean that there is or has been since the days of the feudal regime no change or progress in the status of women or in their attitude toward and thought of this life. Changes were inevitable. Evolution could not be stopped. I only wanted to say that if there still remained today in the women of the younger generation of Japan some really good and precious qualities, they were largely the happy heritage of the admirable example of those older women of my country. In the short space of seventy years, since the latter half of the last century, Japan has undergone and has apparently emerged unhurt from an almost miraculous transformation from a system of feudalism, most highly developed by centuries' training or force of circumstances, into a modern constitutional form of government and the consequent new order of things in the social and industrial life of the nation. The secret of it all is, in my opinion, that the old foundation stone of society, the family, has retained its massive strength, chiefly because of the women who have been the real guardians of that social unit. They had the power and faculty of discharging their responsibilities, which they willingly assumed. Without their admirably self-sacrificing devotion to their homes and families, without their intelligence, courage and tender influence, the nation could not possibly have stood such a sudden and overwhelming change in its life. I want to emphasize this fact, because the women of Japan of

old and probably those of today have so often been misunderstood and misjudged by the people of the West and also by some of their own.

After all is it not true of the history of all nations, especiallly in modern times, that there is no wholesome progress where women are not pure and wholesome, not only in their physical, but in their intellectual and moral equipment as well? If Japan is entitled to any compliments for her progress, more than half is due to her women.

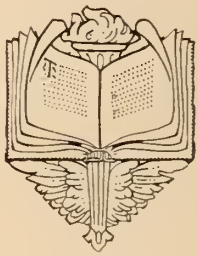
People often talk of the necessity of the emancipation of women. But it seems to me that in my country and elsewhere, it is more the men who need emancipation. If they could get rid of some of their foolish notions of self or their prejudices of each other and could emancipate themselves from the chains of their immediate surroundings and traditional habits and learn to speak in terms of true brotherhood of men, the affairs of the world and of every individual nation would be much better regulated than they are today.

I differ from some ancient philosophers of the East. I do not believe that women are half as selfish and sinful as men. Men are by nature brutal, selfish and aggressive. It is only when they come in contact with the influence of good women that they develop their masculine virtues or their better qualities. I for one feel sad to see women trying to reform men, permit themselves to be drawn into the whirl of men's brutal struggle, where the spirit of love and justice play but little part.

We have in Japan today women, mostly the so-called newly educated, crying for things, not knowing that they are the very things which they are suffering from because they have them. What they really need are the things they could inherit from their mothers, which they either refuse to accept or lose through their own neglect. I often wonder if these young, apparently well-educated women had really good mothers to look after them.

Then we have in Japan another class of young women in ever growing number, whose mothers and elder sisters enjoyed a wholesome life much in the open air on farms, on hill-sides, on sea-shores and in the cheerful surroundings of safe and peaceful homes, now crowding themselves into the close air of congested factories or offices where nothing but the grim hand of business and temptation is seen, simply because they can get

a little more money and because they think they can have more freedom and less exertion, while, in fact, the opposite is the truth.

I am not a reactionary. Nor am I against progress. I am only trying to give you just an indication or two of the woman problems we are having in Japan today. Temptation is strong to talk more about the women of my country of today. But I had better avoid the dangerous ground and confine myself to the prescribed sphere of my subject.

I thank you for your attention.